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Dallas, Echoing Down the Decades

LIBRA

By Don DeLillo.
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By Anne Tyler

DON DeLILLO has produced nine novels in the past 17 years, and by now his admirers have learned to expect almost anything. His central character may be a rock music star or a child math genius; his setting may be a remote Aegean island or a college football field. Certain preoccupations, however, tend to reassert themselves: the assassination of President Kennedy, the labyrinthine underworld of spies and terrorists and (most notably in "White Noise," which won the American Book Award in 1985) the pervasive effect of the modern American news media.

These three subjects come together in "Libra," his latest and richest novel. It is also his most complicated, with a dual slate of characters and a plot line that might be described as herringbone-shaped. Apparently unrelated events slant forward from distant sources to be channeled into a single moment in history: six seconds in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963.

What if, Mr. DeLillo asks, the assassination was a C.I.A. conspiracy? What if agency operatives, disgusted by the Bay of Pigs debacle and alarmed at signs of growing rapprochement between Kennedy and Castro, schemed to stage an unsuccessful attempt on Kennedy's life that would implicate Castro supporters? And what if they seized upon Lee Harvey Oswald — a onetime defector to Russia, sole member of his own unauthorized branch of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee — as the man to shoulder the blame? And finally, what if they decided in the end that a successful attempt would be even more effective than an unsuccessful attempt?

Other people have asked these questions before, of course, but never so provocatively. For one thing, that herringbone plot line serves to make the most humdrum occurrence seem suddenly meaningful, laden with dark purpose. The book begins with Lee Oswald as a boy in the Bronx — a misfit, a chronic truant, sharing oppressively close quarters with his mother. Then there's a brief intermission: a glimpse into the book-filled, document-choked study of Nicholas

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Anne Tyler's 11th novel, "Breathing Lessons," will be published in September.

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Branch, who is writing a secret history of the assassination of President Kennedy. This is followed by our introduction to Win Everett, a C.I.A. man now semiretired, so-called, on account of his overzealousness in the matter of Cuba. It is April 1963, and Everett has just begun to frame his plan for an "electrifying event" that will bring the anti-Castro movement back to life.

Oswald will reappear as a high school dropout in New Orleans, as a marine at a U-2 base in Japan, as a factory worker in Russia and finally as an order filler at the Texas School Book Depository in Dallas. Win Everett will reappear surrounded by more and more associates — first the two former colleagues he trusts most and then other men less predictable, less controllable, as his plan takes on a life of its own. Nicholas Branch will reappear only rarely, sinking ever deeper in a morass of eyewitness accounts, hair samples, chemical analyses, then the accounts of the *dreams* of eyewitnesses and then 25 years of novels and plays and radio debates about the assassination. He's not really part of the story, but he plays an important role nevertheless. He reminds us of the broader view; he casts the light of history over the other characters' most commonplace moments.

It's in those commonplace moments that Mr. DeLillo reveals his genius. After all, he must have had the same source materials available to anyone else — the Warren Commission report, the usual newspaper articles and court proceedings. But he takes the stale facts and weaves them into something altogether new, largely by means of inventing, with what seems uncanny perception, the interior voice that each character might use to describe his own activities. Here, for instance, is a summary of Jack Ruby's movements just before he killed Oswald — a matter of public record, no doubt, but the passage displays a verve all its own:

"He was running late. If I don't get there in time, it's decreed I wasn't meant to do it. He drove through Dealey Plaza, slightly out of the way, to look at the wreaths again. He talked to [his dog] Sheba about was she hungry, did she want her Alpo. He parked in a lot across the street from the Western Union office. He opened the trunk, got out the dog food and a can opener and fixed the dog her meal, which he left on the front seat. He took two thousand dollars out of the moneybag and stuffed it in his pockets because this is how a club owner walks into a room. He put the gun in his right hip pocket. His name was stamped in gold inside his hat."

AT what point exactly does fact drift over into fiction? The book is so seamlessly written that perhaps not even those people who own both upstairs and downstairs copies of the Warren report could say for certain. Oswald's mother, for instance, with her nonstop, plaintive, sometimes unwittingly comic stream of

talk, was probably willing to speak to any newsman who poked a microphone in her face; and therefore Mr. DeLillo had merely to transcribe her long-ago monologues. Or did he? Other voices are equally convincing, and yet obviously not all of those could have been taped. "Jack," Jack Ruby's roommate tells him, "for me to express a facial nature, you know it's hard with words, but I don't think you look so good." A young black marine explains his presence in the brig to a cellmate: "There was a fire to my rack, which they accused me. But in my own mind I could like verbalize it either way. In other way of saying it, the evidence was weak." Both of



Don DeLillo on a Manhattan rooftop.

JOYCE RAVEI

these remarks were uttered in private — not recorded, we have to assume, but created, or at least re-created from hearsay, by a writer with a merciless ear for language.

He knows the elliptical style people use when they've fallen into certain conversational grooves together. "She thinks because she gives me money to rent a bike," Oswald tells his mother, referring to an overbearing aunt. "I barely pick up the phone," Jack Ruby complains to the showgirl dunning him for her paycheck. As in real life, non sequiturs startle us at every turn — the Russian security agent, for instance, breaking off his interrogation of Oswald to say: "I have a click in my knee when I bend.

What do you think, old age?"

But "Libra" is not merely lifelike; it is also, in the best sense, novellike. It tells a story, and it tells it skillfully, with much attention to character. A veteran C.I.A. man cannot make himself go to bed at night without checking to see that the oven is off, and then sometimes double-checking, and reminding himself as he climbs the stairs that he has in fact completed his check. Jack Ruby is the book's sad clown; he takes "scalp treatments that he felt were doing some good although he doubted it," he's "a physical-culture nut when he had time," and his bumbling attempt to link the Kennedy assassination with an "Impeach Earl Warren" group dwindles away after he phones a disk jockey: "Russ, you're a good guy so I called with a question I want to ask. Who's this Earl Warren?" The disk jockey's initial response is: "Are we talking this is blues or rock 'n' roll? There was an Earlene (Big Sister) Warren sang on the West Coast for a while."

And how about the most important character of all? Lee Harvey Oswald has always seemed both much, much too familiar (his rabbity, weak-jawed face staring out of the grimmer sections of every city in America) and endlessly mysterious. To Mr. DeLillo's credit, that ambiguity is kept alive in "Libra." It may even be heightened, because the portrait is so intimate — Oswald washing dishes,

Oswald playing with his baby, Oswald cuffing his wife — and yet still he manages from time to time to surprise us.

Oswald is a loser, a loner, pathetic and self-aggrandizing, one of those people who seize crazily upon the significance of every insignificant coincidence. He tries to shoot the right-wing general Edwin A. Walker but hits Walker's window frame instead; he tries to renounce his United States citizenship but it's early-closing day at the embassy; he tries to defect to the Russians but they're not so sure they want him. Still, sometimes when he's discussing his dissatisfaction with the inequities of capitalism, or his extensive readings in Marxism, you catch a glimmer of intelligence. "I'm not an innocent youth who thinks Russia is the land of his dreams," he tells one Russian. "I look at this coldly in the light of right and wrong. . . . How would I live in America? I would have a choice of being a worker in a system I despise or going unemployed."

FINALLY, what emerges as most central to Oswald's character is this: His picture of himself seems to have been taken by a television camera. He seems to have viewed his life in terms gathered from second-rate newspaper reporters and excited telecasters. Even when he lies bleeding from a suicide attempt, his thoughts are oddly nonprivate in tone: "I won't answer questions about my family but I will say this for publication. Emigration isn't easy. I don't recommend it to everyone." His main ambition is "to be a short story writer on contemporary American life," and he keeps what he calls his Historic Diary in order to reveal "the fears and aspirations of a man who only wanted to see for myself what socialism was like." "Contemporary American life," "fears and aspirations" — we hear these phrases uttered in a slightly self-conscious voice, as if he's trying them on for size before he makes them his own:

"He saw himself writing this

story for Life or Look, the tale of an ex-Marine who has penetrated the heart of the Soviet Union, observing everyday life, seeing how fear rules the country. . . . He saw himself in the reception room at Life or Look, his manuscript in a leather folder in his lap. What is it called, morocco?"

Whether or not the C.I.A. conspiracy actually happened — and we end up persuaded that it could have — the book's most

His picture of himself seems to have been taken by a TV camera.

compelling point is Oswald's curiously external view of himself. He seems to have lacked an inner core, an absolute and unalterable sense of his own character. It's easy to imagine such a man committing murder almost at random. Maybe the assassination was not so much a scheme as a long, helpless, headlong plunge downward.

In "American Blood," an article published by Rolling Stone magazine in 1983, Mr. DeLillo suggested that the John Kennedy assassination was "a story about our uncertain grip on the world — a story exploded into life by a homeless man who himself could not grip things tightly and hold them fast, whose soul-scarred loneliness and rage led him to invent an American moment that echoes down the decades." That Mr. DeLillo has been able to make his readers see the story the same way — that finally we're interested less in the physical events of the assassination than in the pitiable and stumbling spirit underlying them — proves "Libra" to be a triumph. □

Haunted by His Book

"In New Orleans, Lee and Marina lived on Magazine Street. The house is still there, and it looks very much the same as in photographs from the early 1960's. I can't compare it to visiting a famous place like a national monument — it's not at all like that. It's an eerie sense of getting close to the man himself. It's a sense of history, but of a peculiar kind — a history on the margins, a history that people don't really want to know."

Speaking by telephone from his home in the New York City suburbs, Don DeLillo said he spent three years researching and writing "Libra," a fictional biography of Lee Harvey Oswald, as a way of filling in the painful gaps in our knowledge of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. "I invented scenes and dialogues, of course, but I tried to stay as close to what I understood to be the actual Oswald as I could," Mr. DeLillo said, noting that fiction permitted him to go where the facts could not. "In this version, we know how it happened, so the novel, working within history, is also outside it, correcting, clearing up, finding balances and rhythms. I think readers are willing to take imaginative leaps if there's a kind of redemptive truth waiting at the other end."

Like Nicholas Branch, the character who is compiling a secret C.I.A. account of the assassination, Mr. DeLillo was swamped with research material: "I'm sure I'll carry the experience around with me for many years; it's certainly been the most haunting book I've ever worked on. Oswald was the focus, but of course the assassination itself sends out tributaries in a number of different directions, from the U-2 incident to the Bay of Pigs."

Authenticating the research was another

matter. "It's legitimate in the sense that it appeared somewhere in print or on sound tapes or film. Beyond that, you're on your own," he said. (Thus the careful choice of words when asked if it's true, as the novel states, that President Kennedy's brain has been missing from the National Archives for more than 20 years: "This, evidently, is fact.")

Mr. DeLillo relied heavily on the Warren Commission's 26 volumes of testimony and exhibits, which he described as "an encyclopedia of daily life from that era — dental records, postcards, photographs of pieces of knotted string, report cards, the testimonies of hundreds of people, from nightclub comedians to workers in train yards to waitresses." He didn't try to interview the major surviving figures, nor was he very interested in the scores of conspiracy theories set forth in other, mostly nonfiction, books.

His own theory, while at odds with the Warren Commission's, nevertheless discounts conspiracy in favor of a motivation embedded in coincidence, intuition and astrology — hence the book's title. "Certainly," he said, "I don't think there was any orchestrated attempt by established offices in any intelligence agency." Still, he added, "I don't know any more than you do what happened in Dealey Plaza that day. I purposely chose the most obvious possibility — that the assassination was engineered by anti-Castro elements — simply as a way of being faithful to what we know of history. Will we ever know the truth? I don't know. But if someday evidence of a conspiracy does emerge, I expect it will be much more interesting and fantastic than the novel."

KIM HERON